

How the “N St. Consensus Method” Helps Communities Thrive

This method has been successfully used by N Street Cohousing in Davis, California for 27 years.

I. The Eight Steps

(1) When the facilitator calls for consensus on a proposal and no one blocks, the proposal passes.

Up to Six Meetings:

(2) If someone blocks, the person blocking is obligated to meet with small groups of other members in a series of solution-oriented, consensus-building meetings to think through the issues and mutually agree on a new proposal that addresses the same problem as the blocked proposal. They present the new proposal at the next Council.

(3) The small groups are required to meet up to six times and in no more than three months after the proposal was blocked.

(4) The people who supported the proposal can send representatives to these meetings, but they don't have to attend all of the meetings like the blocking person does.

(5) The person blocking is responsible for organizing the meetings, and the meetings must take place. If the person blocking doesn't do this, the group assumes he or she doesn't care about the proposal enough to have made a responsible block. The block is considered dropped and the original proposal is put back on the agenda of the next Council to finalize. This takes record-keeping and tracking, of course.

A New Proposal:

(6) If a new, mutually agreed upon proposal is created in one of the meetings, it goes back to the whole group and is taken up as a new proposal.

67 Percent Super-Majority Agreement:

(7) If the person blocking and the other members cannot come up with a mutually agreed-on new proposal during the series of meetings, the original proposal goes back to the next Council, where it can be passed by a 67 percent super-majority agreement of the members present.

(8) The same process applies if two or three people block. (If more than a few people block a proposal though, of course the proposal doesn't pass because clearly, it doesn't have enough support, and the group does not invoke this process.)

II. Responsibility

It makes anyone who wants to block take more responsibility for the effect of their block on the group. “If you've blocked,” says Kevin Wolf, cofounder of N St. Cohousing and originator of this method, “you've got to be part of the solution. Anyone who wants to block has to ask themselves, ‘Do I not support this proposal enough to go through all this?’”

III. Deterrence

While this method could seem like a lot of work and bureaucracy, N Street members believe it's effective not only because it works well but also because it *exists*. It's a deterrent to frivolous, personal blocking.

In the 20 years since N Street was founded, Kevin estimates there have probably been about 12 blocked issues total. Of these, only two have invoked the six-meeting consensus-building process. Both only reached a second small-group meeting before the participants mutually crafted a new proposal. Thus they've only held four small-group meetings over 20 years to deal with blocks!

(The other 10 blocked proposals were resolved informally outside the meetings, by coming up with let's-try-it solutions that worked.)

IV. Respect

This method is effective because it respects both the person blocking and those who support the proposal.

- It respects the person blocking because it offers up to three months of informal opportunities — and up to six formal opportunities — to share his or her views with others in a more intimate setting, mutually create a new proposal, or persuade at least 26 percent of the people that the proposal should not be passed.

- It respects the people supporting the proposal because, if the small groups cannot build enough consensus to reach agreement, the later 67 percent super-majority agreement will ensure that the most number of people will get the most of what they most want. "Tyranny of the minority" isn't possible.

V. Balancing Power with Responsibility

Tree Bressen highly values inclusivity in community and is passionate about consensus. She considers N Street's six-meeting/ 67% agreement method to be inclusive and fair to everyone. "It seems like consensus to me," she says. "And I like how it balances power with responsibility."